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HRISTOPHER MORLEY

A

Biographical

Sketch

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PAGE & CO.

Photo by Charles H. Davis

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

Christopher Morley

His History done by divers hands, *together with a list of* works *by this author, thus modestly* offered to your attention

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Christopher Morley

THERE are in this country and in England a few copies of a slender blue-gray booklet of verses (long since out of print) with the title "The Eighth Sin" on the cover in large black letters, and beneath it in smaller letters, modestly, the name C. D. Morley. They who own this little book prize it highly, not because it is great poetry (the author would be the first to deny it) but because it is the maiden effort of one Christopher Darlington Morley.

This Christopher Morley, known also as Kit and Chris, was born at Haverford, Pennsylvania, May 5, 1890. His parents are both English by birth, though they have lived for many years in this country. His father, Frank Morley, the distinguished mathematician, is a graduate of Cambridge University who came to Haverford College in 1887 as professor of mathematics. Dr. Morley, an English Quaker, came from Woodbridge, the lovely little town in Suffolk (the home of Edward FitzGerald) to which his son has paid tribute in "Shandygaff." From his mother also, Christopher undoubtedly derived his quota of imagination and literary tastes: she is a gifted musician, a poet, and (her son never fails to add) a fine cook. And her father was at one time associated with the famous London publishing house of Chapman and Hall.

So the formative years of Christopher Morley's life were spent under the shadow of college buildings and in the gentle atmosphere of good books and cultured people. On the campus of Haverford College, a place of unique and quiet beauty, he lived until he was ten years old. This small Quaker college is unique among American institutions in its Anglo-American flavor. When its grounds were laid out, ninety years ago, by an English landscape gardener, he introduced cricket among the students, and Haverford College has been the shrine of that game in America. For many years the college made a point of having one or more distinguished Englishmen on its faculty—perhaps with the characteristic Quaker intention of promoting international friendship. Every four years the college sent its cricket team abroad to spend the summer playing matches with the English colleges. This influence is worth noting, for this, and several summer vacations spent in England during childhood, undoubtedly did much to promote in the young Morley his unusual blend of both civilizations. Ardent American as he is, he likes to think of America and England as two halves of the same idea, and speaks of his childhood as "an Anglo-American capsule."

In 1900 Professor Morley moved to Baltimore to take the chair of pure mathematics at Johns Hopkins, which he still occupies. In that fascinating Southern city Christopher's school days were spent, and he returned to Haverford in 1906 as an undergraduate. He graduated from the college in 1910. It is interesting to note that the subject of his baccalaureate thesis was Robert Louis Stevenson; and the files of *The Haverfordian,* the student literary magazine, show some entertaining boyish outpourings, both in prose and in verse. There were some stories dealing with the misadventures of an Irish housemaid which show a curious anticipation of that vein of domestic comedy he has developed since.

In 1910 he was awarded the Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, representing Maryland, and the next three years were spent at New College. It was here that "The Eighth Sin" was committed. Morley likes to recall the comment of Mr. Herbert Fisher, his tutor at New College, on reading that juvenile pamphlet. "The chief advantage of writing verse in youth," said Mr. Fisher, "is that it improves one's prose style in old age."

Morley has not written very much, in a formal way at least, about his Oxford adventure. Like almost all young Oxonians with literary instinct, he once projected an Oxford novel, and wrote several chapters before it went into his trunk of postponed schemes, to share a corner with the unsuccessful poem submitted in 1913 for the famous Newdigate Prize (the subject set for the Newdigate Poem that year happened to be "Oxford"). One gathers that the beauty and hilarity of that experience, in the last days of a world that can never come again—pre-War England—lie rather too close to the heart for casual journalism. But in a recent poem ("Parsons' Pleasure"—the name of the old bathing pool on the Cherwell at Oxford) we find these lines—

> Two breeding-places I have known
> Where germinal my heart was sown;
> Two places from which I inherit
> The present business of my spirit:
> Haverford, Oxford, quietly
> May make a poet out of me.

And between the lines in some earlier poems, as also in "Kathleen," his light-hearted novelette of an Oxford undergraduate prank, one may discern something of the flavor of that interlude.

In the summer of 1913 he returned to America, and—we out here like to remember—came to Garden City to ask Mr. F. N. Doubleday ("Effendi") for a job.

"I remember, as though it were an hour ago, the first time I ever saw Christopher Morley," says Mr. Doubleday. "He accepted an invitation to come into my office and discuss the burning subject he had so much on his mind, namely—a job.

"He told me of his career from boyhood to very early manhood, and he was delightfully young with an enthusiasm which was very appealing. The high points in his career including his earning the Rhodes Scholarship and serving his term, as I remember it, in New College, Oxford. Christopher had now returned home to earn his living and he thought, as others have, that the most delightful way would be to become part of a publishing house, and Garden City, he added, looked good to him. I gave him the usual bromidic phrases about the difficulties of the publishing business, adding that he would make more money as a bond salesman or in a banking house, and that fortunes were as rare in Garden City as they were plentiful in Wall Street.

"With this sort of conversation about banks and bankers he had small interest which he made quite obvious as he repeated again, 'I want a job, and I want it here and I hope right now,' not with the air of a life insurance agent but with the eagerness of a thirsty soul with refreshment in sight.

"To get a breathing space I asked him if he had any plans along book lines on which a modest publisher could make a few stray dollars. This was indeed an opening. Morley immediately dove into a deep pocket and produced a large number of papers on which were worked out books and plans for series of books in vast array—names of authors in ample numbers who have had beyond the shadow of doubt the divine fire, and I confess I found his enthusiasm most contagious.

"To gain time again, I suggested that to work out all these schemes would almost break the Chemical Bank and I attempted to show him how expensive it was to make a

whole series of books—but again I failed to keep his interest. He had it in his mind evidently that he had come to a publisher to talk books, not finance—a subject which, so far as I have been able to see, Morley found rather boring then and since.

"And so his picturesque talk went on—Christopher full of enthusiasm and hope for a vast collection of plans and the publisher cautious and mildly non-committal. Finally I said to him, 'You would have to be about ten men to successfully carry out all these plans; now if you had your choice of any job in the place what would you choose?' Without a second's hesitation he said, 'Yours.'

"Being a little weighted down that morning with the difficulties of the job which the President of Doubleday, Page & Company takes as a daily routine, the idea much appealed to me and I felt that any youngster who was so eager to assume the burden of a somewhat complicated life might be encouraged. So I told him to hang up his coat and hat, put him at a desk, and told him to go to work at all his manifold plans and literary philanderings, reserving the right to restrain his commitments if necessary.

"An amusing incident happened which I did not know of until afterwards. It seems that he had interviewed another officer of the company before he had seen me, and was told in reply to an insistent demand that there was no job for him and that he had best go back to New York. When

this would-be employer returned a few hours later he was rather surprised to see Christopher installed in the 'job' and going strong.

"This was, so far as I know, the beginning of Morley's connection with the editorial and publishing life. I always enjoyed his association with the house. He had one point especially I remember and that was that when he had an enthusiasm for a book and an author he would never let you forget it. I give him credit for his early discovery of the merits of Mr. William McFee's work. We were accustomed to hold what we called a 'book-meeting,' when each member of the staff gave his suggestion about authors and books. For months when it came Christopher's turn to speak he always began, 'Now, about McFee—we don't appreciate what a comer he is' and so on for five minutes without taking breath until finally it became the joke of the meeting that nothing could be done until Morley's McFee speech had been made. Our jibes influenced him not at all. His only reply to our efforts in humor being to bring on a look of great seriousness and the eternal phrase, 'Now, about McFee.'

"The writer claims to have some knowledge and appreciation of Mr. McFee but if he had the power for which Morley gave him credit, the sailorman's works would sell like Shakespeare and be translated into the tongues of all nations to the nethermost parts of the earth.

"Those were pleasant days and even now to get a regular Morley letter—and they often run to many pages—is a literary treat tempered with regret that one must fall so greatly below the ideal Morley has in his vision of what a real publisher should do and feel."

Besides his discovery of McFee there were two other important events during Morley's sojourn of nearly four years at Garden City. He married Miss Helen Booth Fairchild, a New York girl whom he had met in England, and he

wrote his first novel, "Parnassus on Wheels." From this time forward the story of his life is the story of his work. So completely are they bound together that he hardly distinguishes them himself.

Successively (and successfully) he has held position on The *Ladies' Home Journal* (there are eyewitnesses to this), when he described himself as one of "the little group of wilful men who edit the *Ladies' Home Journal,*" the Philadelphia *Evening Ledger,* and, since 1920, on the New York *Evening Post* where he gives life to an editorial-page column which sails under the name of "The Bowling Green."

His work in "The Bowling Green" is characteristic of his work elsewhere. Light and merry (as, of course, he should be) he never forgets the high responsibility which attends (or should attend) every position in which one sets down the printed word that all may read. The "Green" is playful and informal, but serious withal, and when the skipper nails his flag to the mast and bursts into a defense of something he thinks right it makes no difference what you or I, Tom, Dick, Harry, Harold, or Percival, think of it, he stands by the flag.

"Parnassus on Wheels," published in 1917, projected a new hero in the world of letters, Roger Mifflin, the Prince of Booksellers, a quaint, shrewd, funny little bald-headed prince, but royal all the same, and it introduced a new idea into the world of reality, that of the wagon bookshop, which has since been carried out in various ways in many parts of the country.

"Lord!" cries Roger (there are times when we almost forget and call him Christopher) "when you sell a man a book you don't sell him just twelve ounces of paper and ink and glue—you sell him a whole new life. Love and friendship and humor and ships at sea by night—there's all heaven and earth in a book, a real book, I mean." Farther on in the same volume Mr. Morley says "a good book, like Eve,

ought to come from somewhere near the third rib: there ought to be a heart vibrating in it." This might be called Morley's credo. There is a heart in every one of his books —and the heart is his.

Roger Mifflin exhilarates the pages of another novel—he deserves to continue through many more—"The Haunted Bookshop." In this he has settled down in Brooklyn, and in addition to selling books, is gravely concerned with the education of that very delightful young lady, Titania.

Between "Parnassus on Wheels" and "The Haunted Bookshop" came two other books, "Songs for a Little House," a sheaf of gay and tender lyrics for households of two or more, and "Shandygaff," a collection of essays.

"Shandygaff" appeared at a time when there was a lament abroad that essay, like letter writing, was a lost art. But the people drank Mr. Morley's decoction, found it good to the tongue, and begged for more. The flagging interest in essays and their authors sprang to life, and to-day Morley is perhaps more widely known for his essays than for his poems, his novels, or his short stories.

"Dear Burnet," wrote Don Marquis to Dana Burnet a few weeks after the publication of "Shandygaff," "I wish, while I am away from the office and you are running the *Sun Dial,* that you would say something in it about Christopher Morley's book, 'Shandygaff,' just published by Doubleday, Page & Co. It is altogether the most delightful thing I have got my clutches on for a long time. But I would scarcely dare say so, while I was running the column, because one of the chapters of the book is an appreciation of me—a wonderful chapter. . . . and all the others are nearly as good. . . ."

Luscious titles have Morley's books of essays, "Shandygaff," "Mince Pie," "Plum Pudding," and "Pipefuls." There is one called "Travels in Philadelphia," a series of little excursions about town which made many others besides Mr. A. Edward Newton bemoan the time when Chris Morley

"shook the dust of that city from his ample feet to come to New York."

In 1921, nine years after "The Eighth Sin" first emerged upon the public, the George H. Doran Company issued a beautiful volume called "Chimneysmoke." It is a representative selection from Morley's earlier books of poems, "Songs for a Little House," "The Rocking Horse," and "Hide and Seek." The poems are not primarily written for children, but children adore them. One of the most touching tributes of the many that have come to the author is the bundle of letters (constantly added to) which small boys and girls have written him because they have read and loved the songs. Most of these verses celebrate the joys and humors of domesticity, and Mr. Morley makes one believe that the most desirable, the most indispensable, the most perfect thing on earth is a house—preferably a little one—with a wife and children inside. If real estate agents would scatter copies of "Chimneysmoke" abroad over the country they could dispense with advertising, so thoroughly do his lines

> "abide for proof
> Joy dwells beneath a humble roof."

Mr. Morley feels deeply that the home offers a theme for the Muse that need not be merely saccharine in sentiment. There are some poets, he has remarked, "who deal with homely topics, and make them homelier still." Mr. Vincent O'Sullivan, a penetrating critic, traced the inspiration of Morley's domestic lyrics to "the English intimists, Herrick, George Herbert, Cowper, Crabbe." Indeed, though we do not find Mr. Morley so candid as the Devonshire parson in some matters, there is undoubtedly a kinship with the Herrick who wrote the "Thanksgiving for His House"—

> "A little house, whose humble roof
> Is weather-proof;
> Under the sparres of which I lie
> Both soft, and drie"

and also with the religious mysticism of Herbert. And a poem such as Mr. Morley's "At the Mermaid Cafeteria" (in "Chimneysmoke") is a direct throw-back to the mood of Elizabethan and Caroline poets. Our author's Elizabethan-sounding name has perhaps exerted a subconscious influence. No less a critic than Mr. E. V. Lucas, writing an introduction for the English edition of "Chimneysmoke," says:—

"Here he is established without a rival, on his own ground, as the poet of the home. Domesticity has had many celebrants, but I cannot remember any one work in which such a number of the expressions of Everyman, in his capacity as householder, husband and father, have been touched upon, and touched upon so happily and with such deep and simple sincerity. The poet of *The Angel in the House* was, I suppose, a predecessor; but Coventry Patmore was a mystic and a rhapsodist, whereas Mr. Morley keeps on a more normal plane and puts in verse, thoughts and feelings and excitements that most of us have known but have lacked the skill or will to epigrammatise. If we are to look in literature for a kindred spirit to Mr. Morley's we find it rather in the author of *The Cotter's Saturday Night.* But Mr. Morley is at once more modern and more modest. And he is more whimsical and original as an appreciator."

It is evident that Mr. Morley has tried to leaven sentiment with humor; and, latterly, with that touch of satire that is his *alter ego.* He says, with a sort of rueful confusion, that the critic who described him as an "affectionate scorpion," came close to the truth. For indeed some of his verses do carry an ironical sting—for instance the pseudo "Translations from the Chinese" (his only excursion into free verse), shining chips of satire, wistfulness and beauty, flicked out of the hard pavements of the city.

In 1921 Christopher Morley came to the parting of the ways. He could continue to dig into the vein which he had found so rich and his friends had found so delightful, or he could risk the popularity he had justly earned, by moving on to a place where there was harder rock but more precious

metal. The first meant stagnation the second, growth. So there was really no choice.

The definite line between the old work and the new—a line as imperceptible and as unescapable as the equator—is in a short story called "Referred to the Author" published in 1921 by Doubleday, Page & Company, in "Tales from a Rolltop Desk." "An admirable story," Mr. Edward O'Brien said of it in "The Best Short Stories for 1921," "which almost any contemporary of Mr. Morley would have been glad to sign." The author confesses a particular affection for this story—perhaps partly because none of the many magazine editors to whom it was offered would accept it. It goes deeper than any of the earlier stories, its manner is more polished, and it contains the beginning of that "naïve theology" which forms so large a part of his most important book, "Where the Blue Begins."

It was the poet Morley who conceived this latter, the story of the dog Gissing's search for God, but the novelist wrote it with the help of the dramatist while the essayist (who is the philosopher in the group) stood by and embellished it with wisdom and humour (which is the better part of wisdom). Yet when all these had done their best (and they did) there would have been lacking a certain charm if it had not been for a frisky little boy, as lovable and as irresponsible as Peter Pan, who tweaked the ideas of these graver folk into caprice and fantasy. The little boy, as you

have already guessed, is Morley himself, the *real* Morley, as a critic might say. And it is he who gives to the story not simply the charm of youth, but that infinitely greater charm which belongs to childhood and which is perhaps (who knows?) really the place "where the blue begins."

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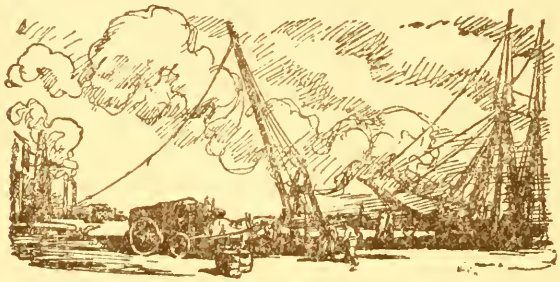

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